

Stella S. Beck

By Anish Dave

A Ray of Light in Darkness

Many people have asked; who is Stella S. Beck? The experiences of Stella Beck during World War II of unspeakable suffering and horrors witnessed by her as a small child, during the Holocaust era, must have left deep personal and emotional scars. She quotes part of a dedication by her cousin Pearl Benisch, an Auschwitz survivor, whose book To Vanquish the Dragon, "To my Dear Cousin Stella, for you and your children to read, to know, and to remember. How man can plunge deep into the pit of evil and become worse then a beast." So how did Mrs. Beck cope against all odds? The horrors she faced, many of us will never even come close to facing. Despite endless reasons to join the sentiment of others in her position that live in the past, Mrs. Beck does not wish to dwell on the horrors and the inhumanities of Nazi madness. Through the strength of the maternal side of her family, which instilled the spirit of positive, deep, and forward thinking, Mrs. Beck now uses the atrocities she faced to better understand the needs in the lives of others. Mrs. Beck is captivating and inspirational with every word she speaks as her presence alone fills a room with life. Through her life story, she inspires others to make a positive change in society using their previous hardships. Beginning with the atrocities from her early life, through the struggles of immigrating to the United States and the choices she made to look for the good in people, she has forged a positive, thoughtful personality. There are numerous individual accounts of survivors of the concentration camps in Poland, Germany, and France but not too many accounts of the starvation and deaths of the prisoners of war in the Soviet Republic of Russia and their Gulags. This is one account worthy to be added to the history of mankind and this is her story.

Itta & Isaac Steinberger, Stella's parents, had a successful dentistry practice in Trzebinia, Poland near Krakow and Auschwitz. In August of 1935 the family returned to their native Berlin, Germany for the birth of their second child Stella because of their national pride. In Trzebinia, young Stella lived with her dad, Isaac, her mom, Itta, and her older brother Emil in an upper middle class life with nannies, maids, and cooks. This comfortable, respectful life in a beautiful town soon came to an end for four year old Stella when the Nazi invasion of Poland and the bombing began. While some of the town's Jewish families stayed in Trzebinia, the Steinberger family decided it would be safer to leave. With the intention of coming back, they gathered some immediate necessities to survive, locked the safe, the house, and the front door of the dentistry. Isaac Steinberger rented two horses and a buggy and fled eastward, away from the bombardment stopping in Krakow to check on and pick up close relatives.

The roads were bombed by invading German forces with dead soldiers and civilians left all over as an unimaginable nightmare unfolded in front of her eyes. Stella still clearly recalls her Uncle Leon lifting her from the wagon and protecting her with his body while the impact of a nearby bombing spewed and covered them with the debris and dirt. People excavated Stella who was being crushed by the weight of her uncle desperately trying to free himself to save her as he feared she was being crushed under him. In addition, her brother Emil, age eleven, was wounded and in pain with blood gushing from his arm. In order to avoid further German attacks, they left

the main road and maneuvered through the forests to get to Lwow, a town between Poland and Russia, where some family members were living. Many events took place in the forest. One traumatic experience she recalls was when crossing a river on a raft. A German plane zeroed in shooting at them and in front of her eyes the horse and the boatman were shot to death. With blood, horror and fear of the plane returning, her father and his brother brought the raft to the other side and disposed of the dead horse and the boatman quickly. Little Stella experienced the horrors of the start of the holocaust first hand. Despite living through extreme conditions, she still felt safe as her parents made sure that she knew that nothing would happen to her. They finally reached Lwow which started a new chapter.

From the forest, the Steinberger family reached the city of Lwow in Poland, a border town that was the forefront of the war. Everyday, Soviet and German forces vied for control of this important town. At that time, Nazis were using biological warfare against their enemies. Almost everyday, warning signals of gas attacks would fill the ears of the Steinberger family as they rushed to the basement to keep themselves safe. Despite severe conditions, Stella's mother woke up every morning, put on her gas mask and went to volunteer at the local hospital to serve injured soldiers, who faced severe jaw and face injuries. Through the strength they received from each other and from their inner spirituality, the Steinberger family survived the lurid conditions. Life in Lwow soon came to an end as there was a knock on the door one evening.

In opening the door, they saw Soviet NKVD, Russian police much like the German SS, at the door with their gun holsters open. They informed the Steinberger family that unless they immediately accepted Soviet citizenship, they would be immediately taken as prisoners of war. Isaac Steinberger, an ardent patriot, who fought for Germany's ally Austria in World War I was taken captive as a POW by the Soviets, refused to accept their ultimatum of Soviet citizenship. In rejecting it, the Steinberger families was instructed to quickly gather what they could and were told to board the waiting truck to be transported to the train tracks. There they were loaded onto cattle cars to be taken to the Soviet Gulags. On the train, the prisoners faced stuffy, dark, and unsanitary conditions with meager rations while under constant watch of the NKVD. During this whole ordeal, the prisoners were not informed of their destination until they reached the Soviet Gulag, a labor camp named NuzyYary. This Gulag was located in the midst of a vast virgin forest with wild animals roaming around. The adult males were mobilized as lumberjacks and were instructed on how to cut down pine trees and build their own shelter. This all needed to be done speedily as a very severe winter was around the corner of 50-70 below zero temperatures with snow rising up to the roof tops of the cabins. A few cabins already existed, but they were assigned to the NKVD. Some of the Russians who came to run the Gulags helped instruct the building process of the cabins. Life in NuzyYary for the majority, mostly Polish Jews, was nothing like they were accustomed to. Almost all prisoners were affluent professionals whose past did not prepare them for the kind of lifestyle and work of the Gulag.

Stella's mother set up her dental equipment and proceeded to do what she knew best. She would have to walk thirty miles in the wild animal infested forest to the nearest village to pick up dental supplies for those who sought her services. In addition to serving inmates, she served Russians from surrounding areas that needed her expertise especially when they were in pain. To compensate her, they would bring food. Through this dark time, she was the ray of light in everyone's life. To this day, Stella praises her mother's, courage, perseverance, and kindness for

sharing herself and food she received for her work without ever asking anything in compensation. It was in the Gulag's that Stella first saw how a few empowering people had such a huge and positive effect on her life and those of others.

In 1941, with the formation of a Polish unit in the army of the Soviet Union to fight against Nazi Germany, a decree was passed from Moscow to free the prisoners of war from the Gulag camps. The Steinberger's took that opportunity to leave and embark on a new journey to find a safe haven. However, now they confronted even greater hardships especially those of national famine throughout the country due to Hitler's invasion deep into Russia. The family traveled from the Volga River, to the Caspian Sea, and the deserts of Central Asia in wagons, cattle cars, barges, or whatever they could find to get them to the next town. After all this travel, the family finally stopped in Kargaly before finding work in a factory in the adjacent big city of Alma Ata, Kazakhstan near Manchuria. It was there again that young Stella saw people around her dying of homelessness and hunger; the only way they survived was through Stella's mother's ability to practice dentistry. At the end of the war in 1945, the prisoners of war were allowed to return to Poland. This is when the long journey by train across Russia began. The Steinberger family finally arrived in Krakow and eagerly went to check on belongings in their home in Trzebinia. Noticing the extreme hostility and lingering Anti-Semitism, with many returning Jews being murdered in order to avoid having to return their property, the Steinberger family decided to give up everything they owned and leave the country. In order to save themselves and find a new life they were smuggled by underground organizations through Czechoslovakia and ended up at a Displaced Persons camp in Muenchenberg, Germany. At the DP camp Stella's mother was able to continue her dentistry practice for the camp's refugees and managed to enroll Stella's brother Emil into Frankfurt medical school and Stella was to attend a Hebrew school located in the camp. However, school curriculum was solely taught in Hebrew which was a language that Stella could not even understand but she found it in herself to manage it well.

In 1949, Stella and family were sponsored by her aunt to come to America. With little knowledge of the English language and at the age of 14, Stella landed in Ellis Island, New York. Again Stella had to readjust her lifestyle with a new language and new customs. Through all the challenges, Stella graduated from James Monroe High School in the Bronx, New York at the age of 16. From high school, she joined her brother Emil and his wife Anna at the University of Iowa where they were completing medical school. Due to her father's heart attack Stella Steinberger returned to New York where she attended Columbia University and worked full time. It is at Columbia where she met her husband Jim who was a recently discharged Korean War veteran. After living in various places around the country, they settled in California where she has resided since 1959 and has successfully raised seven children. Now she is a proud grandmother of over twenty and a great-grandmother of eight. She has owned a service business for over 40 years, on the Board of Directors of Interface Sharing which feeds thousands of people, and is the founding president of the Beynenu senior group in the tri-valley congregation Beth Emek. She has also been on the presidential business commission and is the founder of the Trilogy concept to reduce recidivism of paroles and youth at risk. With all she does, Stella still finds time to mentor those who need help.

The story of Mrs. Beck left me utterly speechless, but what left me even more amazed is how she has used her experience not to spread hate but love and inspiration. To this day Mrs.

Beck regards the Russian people as some of the most good-hearted people she has ever met despite all the experiences she faced in the Soviet Union especially the Gulags. While talking to Mrs. Beck, she read the second part of the quote by her Auschwitz surviving cousin Pearl,” How a human being can ascend into lofty heights and become higher than angels. Yes, higher than angels.” A human can ascend into heights of angelic deeds by being like Stella who has used ideas of her hardships as a young girl from 4 to 14 years old in order to touch other lives. This can be seen in the philanthropic endeavors she has engaged in such as mentoring those in need, participating in interfaith food distribution to the needy, and creating an answer to reducing recidivism. After meeting someone like Mrs. Beck, my only hope is that people in the future can learn from the hardships they confront and use them not as a detriment but an asset in order to better the future.